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ABSTRACT

The curriculum renewal movement has two interconnected goals--to empower both teachers and students and to move from a skills-based curriculum to a process-based one. With so much educational effort focusing on reading and writing, and with new information supporting holistic approaches coming from psycholinguistic and language arts studies, it should not be surprising that what promises to be a far-reaching curriculum reform is beginning in the language arts. At the center of expressive writing are two ideas: that the writing be meaningful to the writer and that it generally follow the steps in the writing process. As teachers earnestly seek to reform the schools, they sense the increasing need for and the benefits derived from opportunities to network on a whole range of issues. The computer can improve the ability of teachers to design, deliver, and disseminate curricula and to use networking to help share information about curriculum design. Too often in the past, staff development has been a "training" process in which teachers were conditioned to "use" or "deliver" a prescribed curriculum in prescribed ways. Staff development in schools devoted to restructuring education will provide teachers with time and expert support that will enable them to reflect upon and refine their curriculum while working in cooperative curriculum design groups. Combining networking, the writing process, and word processing with curriculum design holds promise that the curriculum renewal movement will achieve its two interconnected goals. (RS)

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Language Arts, Word Processing, and the Curriculum Renewal Movement

by Jon Madian

Note: This article explores the development of curriculum renewal and its relationship to whole language, process writing, networking, and word processing.

Curriculum Renewal

The curriculum renewal movement has two interconnected goals—to empower both teachers and students and to move from a skills-based curriculum to a process-based one. The interconnection between these two goals is of utmost significance. Process-based instruction encourages students to develop their problem-solving skills rather than their ability to make "right" responses on multiple-choice tests or give back the right information from lectures. Process-based instruction, when combined with cooperative activities, creates a community of empowered people who ask important questions and work together searching for needed answers.

The process-based curriculum is not new, though its current status is supported by extensive recent research in psycholinguistics, problem solving, cooperative learning, and process-based writing. Dewey's work provided an excellent foundation for these holistic approaches during the first part of this century. During the 1960s, discovery learning and process-based work were carried out in science, mathematics, social studies, and language arts.

Whole Language Leads the Way

With so much of our educational effort focusing on reading and writing, and with new information supporting holistic approaches coming from psycholinguistic and language arts studies, it shouldn't surprise us that what promises to be a far-reaching curriculum reform is beginning in language arts. The theories and practices developed from language experience, the Poets in the Schools Program, and the Bay Area Writing Project (now the National Writing Project) lead directly to the current whole-language approach to language arts instruction. The whole-language movement firmly establishes that "meaning-based" instruction is relevant for all grade levels, K-12, and adds a significant, formal emphasis on the study of literature and the writing process for developing students' oral and written language skills.

Explaining Whole Language

A poem by Paul Stachowksi, a high school English teacher from New York, gets at the concepts behind the whole-language movement in contrast to the atomized, skills-based curriculum and the related skills continuums. Stachowski explains that the title of his poem, "Letter to No One," came from a workshop in which the presenter talked about the problem of having students write letters to "no one at all," and that the last line of the poem came from an experience he had as a third-grader. One day during class, he looked out the window and noticed that although the sun was shining brightly, it was raining. Enthusiastically, he interrupted the teacher, imploring that she explain this impossible event. The teacher's response was to "rush to close the blinds":

Letter to No One (Opportunity Lost)

We are on task in our rows again:
Five rows of five seats each—
A square of measurably focused minds
Writing letters to no one at all.

The sun pales; the window shakes.
Wake up, teacher! Wake up!
The wind is rising; leaves are aswirl
In a pillar that twists the sky.

Monsters live under our beds for sure!
Our parents wonder: are they really ours?
We'd spread our arms to fly like kites,
And we know that we all must die.

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Fears and wisdom live wordlessly,
Uncircumscribed by rules;
We need to laugh and cry and sing
With words like leaves in the sky.

We pass our papers to the right,
Placing ours on top of the ones we get;
We kept our margins nice and straight
While you rushed to close the blinds.

The challenge for the language arts teacher using the whole-language approach is to stimulate students until they become pillars "aswirl" with living language that "twists the sky," inspired and intoxicated by the lilt of dialect. As the swirl of language lifts students skyward, reading and writing are integrated into the process, and skills and drills are assigned their proper place in relationship to the fertile experiences in which language and life make their mutual discoveries. The psycholinguists tell us that language learning develops through intrinsically motivated, generative or expressive usage—talking to people we care about, solving relevant problems, imitating those we admire and love, and modeling our expression upon useful and/or delightful language patterns. Language skills don't develop very efficiently through the analysis of language or by learning rules of expression. Not only do "Fears and wisdom live wordlessly, / Uncircumscribed by rules," but vocabulary and syntax also are learned and lived "Uncircumscribed by rules."

In the search for instructional strategies that provide wholeness, that set the word aswirl, like Van Gogh's sunlight, illuminating, defining, discovering, and even creating the world, it is little wonder that expressive writing and literature study emerge as the vortexes of the new language arts curriculum.

Process Writing and Curriculum Design

At the center of expressive writing are two ideas: that the writing be meaningful to the writer and that it generally follow the steps in the writing process. The writing process is not merely a strategy for learning to write. Rather, it is a nonlinear sequence of steps necessary for turning the creative organization of ideas into written form. With slight changes, these steps can describe the questioning, organizing, and designing activities of any artist, architect, or scientist, in fact, of anyone solving problems that matter to them, including teachers involved in designing and refining the curriculum.

In process writing, a set of prewriting experiences that start the thinking process comes first—brainstorming and clustering of ideas, listing things you know about a topic, reading about a topic, interviewing, watching films, taking field trips, and/or wandering about in a state of confusion feeling uneasy and asking questions that don't seem to get at the problem to be solved. Next comes the process of roughly organizing your ideas, generating a set of hypotheses, and writing an initial draft. This is followed by rereading the early drafts, "field-testing" the writing, and perhaps obtaining peer responses. The last steps include revising, editing, and "publishing" the finished piece of writing.

Teachers engaged in improving curriculum find that they are using the same problem-solving, whole-language processes that they wish to design for their students. The problem before them—of designing an integrated curriculum that is relevant to their students and that will encourage and shape the development of sensitivity and skills in organic ways—requires ongoing thought, speculation, experimentation, and refinement. To design a holistic curriculum is truly to create new cultural experiences that are relevant for particular students. This is a wonderfully challenging, worthwhile, difficult, and creative opportunity.

The Need for Networking

In a recent *American School Board Journal* article entitled "Teacher networks are the first step in redesigning education's work place" (Mann, 1989), the author speaks of the need for teachers, as professionals, to network. "Given this state of affairs," the author says, "Networking—teachers talking to teachers . . . [as] other professionals are accustomed to do—appears to be one of the few realistic options for restructuring our $212 billion education enterprise" (p. 39).

As teachers earnestly seek to reform our schools, they sense the increasing need for and the benefits derived from, opportunities to network on a whole range of issues. When networking is structured so that teachers of similar grade levels and with similar kinds of students meet and work together, then this time is very productive. If teachers expect students to work with an empowering, problem-solving curriculum, teachers too will need to go through the process by creatively solving their own curriculum problems. Seen in this light, staff development becomes networking, or cooperative curriculum development.

Enter Word Processing

In one of its senses, the term *networking* means using computers to communicate through various electronic networks. Interestingly, when the concept of networking achieved popularity in the 1960s, people, not technology, were the focus. Now, in the age of technology, the two differing senses of *networking* can go

hand-in-hand. If the computer is the tool for the information age, perhaps it will improve our ability to design, deliver, and disseminate curricula and to use networking to help us share information about curriculum design.

For example, last year at Kemble Elementary School, the California Model Technology Site in Sacramento, teachers met every six weeks in grade-level teams to evaluate and redesign their curriculum in order to make it more literature- and process-based. Each team met around a computer and used a word-processing program. At the prewriting stage, the word processor was used like butcher paper; teachers used it to brainstorm for ideas. Next, it was used to write lesson plans in rough draft form. It was then used for refining that draft. Finally, it was used to develop student writing activities that would be printed by the computer or delivered, interactively, to a student at the computer.

The point has been made that the computer differs from a pencil or typewriter by being both an input *and* output device rather than being solely for output. In other words, the moment you write with a pencil or typewriter your thoughts are "published," and altering them is difficult. Therefore, neither the pencil nor the typewriter facilitates collaborative writing. When you write on a computer, however, your ideas remain flexibly drawn, waiting to be altered with the greatest of ease.

Thus, for the first time, we find that people are able to think out loud and write their ideas in a collaborative manner, refining their ideas through various iterations. This has tremendous implications for any process of design that involves writing and, in fact, for the teaching of writing. In a recent issue of *The Writing Notebook*, Ken Kesey, author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, describes how he taught a college writing class by using word processing. The goal of the class was to generate ideas for, write, and publish a collaboratively written novel. A primary teaching strategy Mr. Kesey used was to model the composing and revision process while his students watched, questioned, and contributed (Knox-Quinn, 1989).

The Issue of Staff Development

Efforts at staff development could easily take a cue from such collaborative enterprises as those described above. Too often in the past, staff development has been a "training" process in which teachers were conditioned to "use" or "deliver" a prescribed curriculum in prescribed ways. This training focused on the teacher as a technician. Delivery of the training was usually modeled on the expert lecturer format, with teachers playing the role of passive students.

During the next few years, we can imagine that staff development in schools devoted to restructuring education will provide teachers with time and expert support that will enable them to reflect upon and refine their curriculum while working in cooperative curriculum design groups. Applying methods from the writing process, teachers will use word processing to support problem solving and curriculum development and refinement.

Since teachers, like students, learn from modeling, more time will be devoted to helping teachers use the writing process to solve the kinds of curriculum problems that matter deeply to them and that can only be solved through a design process that involves serious questioning, testing of strategies, and refinement. For both the development and delivery of this new, teacher-generated curriculum, we can imagine that the word processor will be an important tool for both design and instruction.

Combining networking, the writing process, and word processing with curriculum design holds promise that the curriculum renewal movement will achieve its two interconnected goals—empowering teachers and students, and moving from a skills-based curriculum to a process-based one. Since the means and the ends—the process and the product—are one, we may finally have achieved a sensitive, living approach to designing and refining the educational life of students and teachers working together in our schools. ◩

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